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THE MECHANICS OF ANCIENT TRADE IN WESTERN ASIA

Reflections on the location of Magan and Meluhha

By M. E. L. Mallowan

I am indebted to Dr. A. Ghosh, Director-General of Archaeology in India for his kind permission to publish here the substance of a lecture which I delivered to the Oriental Congress in Delhi, in 1961

Anyone whose profession is excavation has sooner or later found some ancient objects which in their time had been imported from abroad, and has no doubt asked himself: how did these foreign goods reach their destination? To me this question and the problems which it invokes have always been most rewarding, for the answers are fundamental to our understanding of human progress. The movement of goods must imply the transit of ideas; it is a function of archaeology to elicit the evidence and to draw the proper conclusions from it.

Let me begin with two concrete examples from prehistoric sites in Mesopotamia. Many years ago I was working in a North Syrian settlement called Chagar Bazar which flourished during the fifth millennium B.C. and there, satisfactorily stratified, I found a little decorative shell of a variety known as *Cypraea Vitellus*.¹ It had been imported from the Indian Ocean, probably from that end of it which we now know as the Persian Gulf—a distance of perhaps a thousand miles or so. Who brought it there? Was it carried all the way by a lonely prehistoric trader, or did it pass through many hands on its long journey? Behind this little bead there lies a long forgotten story of prehistoric travel which helps to explain the widespread evidence of technological ideas at this very time, for the contemporary painted pottery of the southern Euphrates valley in the city of Eridu, not far from the Persian Gulf, was already reflecting the gay designs of a village ware that was then in use and truly at home a thousand miles to the north.

Belonging to that same period we found at Arpachiyah, not far from Mosul, in the upper Tigris valley, large quantities of obsidian.² There was an obsidian necklace; there were the component parts of what seem to have been a helmet, thousands of obsidian blades, knives and scrapers together with large cores from which they had been struck. Now obsidian, which may be popularly described as a kind of natural volcanic glass, is a comparatively rare commodity and in this case we happen to know exactly where it came from: the region of Lake Van where three varieties, including a clear crystalline, a tortoise-shell, and a shiny black, exactly comparable to the discoveries at Arpachiyah, have been located together. In order to obtain supplies of this commodity prehistoric caravans probably had to make a return journey of about 400 miles between Northern 'Irāq and Eastern Asia Minor.³

Again we ask ourselves the question how were these journeys organized? What was given in exchange? Were any of the craftsmen who struck and fashioned the obsidian northerners? Did they live in Arpachiyah, or did the northerners supply the goods and the Mesopotamian natives fashion them? Why eventually did this trade die out? The answers are shrouded in the mists of prehistory. But again we learn that such movements had even wider ramifications, for not far from the obsidian quarries we also find prehistoric village settlements at places such as Tilki Tepe,⁴ where the peasants were using an inferior variety of the now familiar painted pottery known as Tell Halaf ware which was then the household crockery of villages in the upper Tigris region. At Arpachiyah the women drank cream from Halaf pots while the men shaved with Vannic obsidian razor blades.

¹ *Iraq* III, part 1 (1936), p. 10, note 4.

² *Iraq* II, part 1 (1935), pl. XI.

³ The subject of obsidian is one that is being at present extensively investigated by Mr. Colin Renfrew and his conclusions when published will be of great interest and relevant to this problem. It may be that other sources of supply were available to the

inhabitants of Arpachiyah and it remains to be seen if we are entitled to draw any definite conclusion in the matter.

I have now learned that an article discussing this problem is likely to appear soon; see J. R. Cann and A. C. Renfrew in the *Proceedings of the Society XXX*, London, 1964.

⁴ *Iraq* VIII (1964), "Excavations in the Balikh Valley", p. 115, note 4.

Thus far we are obliged to speculate, but fortunately in Mesopotamia, quite early on, written documents break through the silence of prehistory. Let me give you an example. A little before 2350 B.C. King Sargon who reigned at Agade, a city still undiscovered, and as I think, buried beneath the far-flung silt of Babylon, was called to rescue a colony of the merchants who were being sorely oppressed by the local ruler of a city called Parsuhanda⁵ which was situated in the middle of Asia Minor; its relief therefore involved a march of nearly a thousand miles. Unfortunately, this heroic episode was remembered for more than a thousand years in the archives of the Hittite and the Egyptian capitals.⁶ It seems most probable that the motive for the march was King Sargon's determination to defend the interests of fellow nationals who were doubtless trading in cloth and in garments in exchange for silver and other commodities. Here we have an amusing ancient parallel for the resort to force by early traders of the East India Company, who by some most distinguished authorities have been condemned for pleading the defence of an acquisitive trade as an excuse for imperial aggrandizement.

But to return to Sargon, that episode properly recorded on clay tablets was long thought by epigraphists to have been a traditional romance, a mere travesty of history. Archaeology has proved how wrong they were, for about fifty years after those tablets had been deciphered an expedition which I directed at Tell Brak in the Habur valley of North Syria discovered an enormous Palace-Fortress which had been built by Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, certainly for the express purpose of guarding his lines of communication with Asia Minor.⁷ A palace built at Assur on the Tigris, as I think at about the same time, was planned on very similar lines to the one at Brak and shows how in the last quarters of the third millennium B.C. Akkadian trade had in its train brought with it the spread of a uniform architectural planning. An improved architecture was in fact a by-product of the trade in metal and in wool.

The Sargonid dynasty which achieved these things was remembered for nearly 2,000 years as the classical pattern of Mesopotamian monarchy.⁸ Its military organization brought it into touch with more distant fields than had ever been reached before: with Cappadocia and the Mediterranean Sea; with Assyria and the Persian Gulf; and by a treaty, with the King of Elam. Their works of art, sculpture, bronzes and seals, many of them supreme triumphs of craftsmanship, spread to all these places.

As a part of this hitherto unparalleled expansion we find an inscription of Sargon who ascended the throne in about 2370 B.C. proclaiming that ships destined for Tilmun, Makkan and Meluhha were moored in the harbour of Agade (Fig. 1). Here for the first time in history we have documentary evidence for trade with the fringes of India, already attested by the tangible evidence of archaeology. This trade, which continued over a period of at least four centuries, was based largely on the exchange of Mesopotamian garments, wool, silver, perfumed oil and leather, against large quantities of copper and smaller but no less valuable supplies of ivory, beads, semi-precious stones and onions. It was above all the ivory, both raw and manufactured, and perhaps also the beads which came from the Indian end of this far-flung trade route. I need not discuss this evidence in detail for it must be familiar to most of you, and indeed many of my colleagues have written learnedly about it: the relevant texts from Ur were first brought into perspective by A. L. Oppenheim in a classic paper entitled *The Seafaring Merchants of Ur*.⁹ There it was rightly stressed that Tilmun—probably the island of Bahrain, or if not Bahrain, then a locality near to it—was the entrepôt for the trade between Babylonia and Makkan—Meluhha.¹⁰ Exactly where these latter places are to be located we do not yet know, and doubtless their boundaries

⁵ J. Garstang and O. R. Gurney, *The Geography of the Hittite Empire*, p. 64; located near the modern Nevşehir, see map opposite p. 1.

⁶ For discussion of the sources see Sidney Smith, *Early History of Assyria*, p. 81 f.

⁷ *Iraq* IX (1947).

⁸ Good account of the Sargonid dynasty in B. Hrozný, *Ancient History of Western Asia*, "India and Crete", pp. 69-76, and see also *The Cambridge Ancient History* I, ch. XIX (1963), C. J. Gadd, *The Dynasty of Agade and the Gutian Invasion*.

⁹ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 74, No. 1, January-March 1954.

¹⁰ Recent discoveries in Bahrain were the subject of an interesting paper read at this Congress by Geoffrey Bibby. We await with interest his publication of a number of cylinder seals, Mesopotamian in character, which may provide strong confirmation for the chronology of Indianesque seals and other material found in the island. See also "The Ancient Indian Style Seals from Bahrain" by the same author in *Antiquity* XXXII, No. 128, December 1958. The island of Failaka, about forty miles south of Basrah, the scene of recent excavations, also has claims for identification as Tilmun, but conclusive proof is still lacking.



Fig. 1.

were never exactly defined, but the problem needs reinvestigation since T. Jacobsen has recently challenged the assumption that they are to be connected with India and asserted that they should be identified with Egypt and Ethiopia respectively.¹¹ Weidner had perhaps better grounds for suggesting that at a period much later than the one with which we are concerned their geographical setting had been switched to the Arabian foreshore.¹² However that may be, for several centuries before and after 2000 B.C. they certainly lay on the route to India. This has now been decisively proved by Ilya Gershevitch through a fresh examination of a passage in one of the Achaemenian inscriptions.¹³ Gershevitch has identified the old Persian name of the timber imported by Darius for his palace at Susa as the Sissoo tree, a Himalayan species of hard wood which still grows freely in S. Iran, for example in the district of Kermān. Now in the Akkadian version of Darius's trilingual inscription this same Sissoo tree (O. P. Yaka) is referred to as the *mesu* wood of Makkan. And to that same country and to Meluhha adjacent to it a Sumerian priest-king named Gudea sent expeditions in the twenty-second century B.C. in search of the same hard wood.¹⁴ In these early inscriptions many passages make it perfectly clear that Magan or Makkan was a part of Iran beyond Elam, and next to the mountains of Kimash from which Gudea also extracted copper and made maces. Magan, the country of mines, also supplied him with a hard stone, probably diorite, and it is clear that foreign enterprise was attracted by the prodigious wealth of copper in the Zagros, archaeologically best attested by the innumerable bronzes of Luristān.

As to Meluhha, that really was regarded by men of Mesopotamia as the back of beyond. A recently published clue to its location comes in a proverb,¹⁵ most probably written in the old Babylonian period, about 1800 B.C., from Nippur which runs:

The donkey of Anshan

The . . . of Parahse

The cat of Meluhha

The elephant of the steppe . . . which bite off willow as though it were a leek.

Meluhha was thus deemed to be situated beyond two districts of S.W. Iran next to a country in which the elephant had its habitat.

The testimony of this text is strengthened by a complementary passage in the Survey of Sargon's Empire (Sargon of Agade) which states that 120 *biru* (about 800 miles) [is the distance] from the tail of the Euphrates to the border of Meluhha.¹⁶ If, as seems probable, the "tail of the Euphrates" lay approximately on the latitude at which this river flowed into the marshy lakes at the southern end of

¹¹ *Iraq* XXII (1960), p. 184, note 16.

¹² *Iraq* XXII (1960), p. 184, note 16, reference quoted.

¹³ *BSOAS* XIX (1957), part 2, "Sissoo at Susa".

¹⁴ Called *ešu* or *KAL* in the texts.

¹⁵ B. W. G. Lambert, *Babylon Wisdom Literature*, p. 273.

¹⁶ This passage in the text is quoted by Sidney Smith, *Early History of Assyria*, p. 89. It is therein stated that at "the border of Meluhha is Bit-Sin, which Sargon, the king of hosts, when he conquered all heaven . . .". Consequently an ancient site of this period should be identifiable on the western frontier of Meluhha. The latest and best edition of the text is by Weidner in *AFO* XVI (1952-3) and in that article there is a full discussion of Meluhha. Furthermore I owe the following reference and comment to the kindness of Professor C. J. Gadd: "Another interesting reference to Meluhha is in a variant, unpublished as yet, from Ur of the 'Enki and Ninhursag' myth edited by Kramer. Here Meluhha with the same characteristic products comes between Tukrish and Markhashi (or Parahse). The trouble with all these eastern districts is location. For Parahse, see E. Sollberger, *JCS* X, 1956, p. 19: 'Five fat sheep for Banana, the man of Marhaši (as he was) going to Uruk: they were loaded in the boat.' In the next paragraph there is a reference to the man of Simanum which

I suppose was in the vicinity. The text is one of a series relating to the coronation of Ibbi-Sin. A series of religious ceremonies were performed on various days at Ur, Nippur, and Uruk. Meluhha is closely associated with Magan (especially) but also with Anshan, Parahse, Tukrish, and another land called Sherikhum, which is in the Sargon inscriptions. None of these can at present be satisfactorily located with geographical limits, but it is certain that they were all lands in W. and S.W. Persia, and very probable that at least Magan and Meluhha were somewhere on the N. shores of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, how far eastward extending we have yet to obtain satisfactory evidence, but I have no doubt it is now only a question of time. It seems to me certain, in any case, that Meluhha was—in this early period at least—a land to the east of Babylonia, and nowhere in Africa at all. But despite all this it seems we cannot dismiss the African location for other ages, difficult as it looks to us to admit such an enormous variation; references in the Amarna letters of Rib-Addi appear the most decisive, where it seems impossible to suppose anywhere else implied." Furthermore in the neo-Assyrian period, seventh century B.C. (Sargon II of Assyria to Assur-bani-pal) Meluhha was certainly thought of as lying beyond Nubia.

Sumer below the city of Eridu,¹⁷ we may reckon that the western boundary of Meluhḫa must be sought at least as far east as modern Jāsk on the Persian Gulf, and if so the littoral of this province would probably have comprised the localities of Chāhbār, Gwadar, and perhaps Pasni at its eastern end (Fig. 1).¹⁸ There are therefore good grounds for the conclusion that in the early second millennium B.C. the eastern end of Meluhḫa marched with the very confines of ancient India, against that part of it which today is denominated as independent Pakistan. Moreover there is a possible allusion to Meluhḫa in classical Sanskrit texts where a word *Mleccha*, said to be of non-Indo-Aryan origin “was used to denote foreign tribes and languages, especially those peoples who did not respect vedas and the Aryan way of life”.¹⁹ If we can accept the usage of this word as the equivalent of the ancient Meluhḫa we have a powerful reinforcement to our previous arguments.

The products of Meluhḫa that attracted trade were much the same as those of Magan: copper, *mesu* or sissoo wood, onions, ivory, as is appropriate to a country near to India, and above all a coveted form of ivory ornament, a bird called the *DAR* (*mušen*) *Me-luḫ-ḫa*: can it have been the peacock so often represented on Harappan pottery?

In the time of Sargon of Agade goods from these distant parts may have been carried by men who were not native to Mesopotamia, for it is less likely that Akkadian sailors from the middle Euphrates would have ventured so far. Two centuries later under King Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 B.C.) who revived the coastal trade which had evidently ceased in the confusion at the end of the Agade dynasty, this situation had changed. Thereafter, until the Larsa period (c. 1900 B.C.) the trade was organized by a class of merchants who styled themselves *alik Tilmun* which may be freely translated “the go-getters of Tilmun”. These men were natives of Ur and accredited to this coastal entrepôt. Makkan ceased to be mentioned altogether in the old Babylonian period; the supply of ivory then dwindled to nothing, and with the collapse of Larsa these enterprises came to an end.

It was at the time when Ur was subject to Larsa that the widely diffused Indianesque seals most strikingly attest the transmaritime range of a far-flung merchandise and remind us of the part played by men such as the Tilmun merchants. For a year or two I was familiar with one of them, if I may put it that way, for in 1925–31 I worked in the city of Ur and still have a vivid memory of digging out the

¹⁷ Ur and possibly Eridu were the two largest cities at this early period on the southern confines of Sumer, but it is known that below that latitude there were still a number of ancient settlements, all of them in marshy country. These latter places, with the exception of a site named Abū Salabikh, seem for the most part not to be much earlier than the first millennium B.C., and in any case are likely to have been thought of as below the “tail of the Euphrates”. On the other hand it seems not unlikely that a part of the area now under water was relatively dry, especially along the lower reaches of the Euphrates, and if so we might easily calculate the western confines of Meluhḫa as lying as much as 100 miles east of Jask. For the topography of ancient settlements in the marshes of southern Iraq see the article by Dr. Georges Roux entitled “Recently Discovered Ancient Sites on the Hammar Lake District (Southern Iraq)”, *Sumer* XVI (1960), p. 20 f.

¹⁸ There does not appear to be any very ancient sea-port on the barren and inhospitable coast of the Makrān, but two Harappan coastal sites have recently been identified—see note²² below. Inland along the Kej valley a number of ancient settlements investigated by Aurel Stein may have represented stages on an overland route through Makkan and Meluhḫa. Interesting in this context is Sutkagēn Dor which now lies some fifty miles upstream from the bay of Gwadar, on the Dasht river which however only becomes navigable some thirty-six miles below Sutkagēn Dor, and allowing for considerable changes in the alluvium during the last 4,000 years can hardly have been accessible to shipping, even in antiquity. The Balūch tradition that Sutkagēn Dor was once reached by the sea and served as a harbour, “bandar”, would however

seem to be based on the fact that sea-shells abound in the district. It is thus probable that the transit of goods depended on a combination of overland with maritime traffic: Akkadian texts provide clear evidence that shipping was much used from the Agade to the Larsa period. Stein believed that the archaeological material from Sutkagēn Dor was at least in part contemporary with that of Periano Ghundai, Moghul Ghundai, and Sur Jangal: there is nothing against its having been occupied towards the end of the third millennium B.C., and it may well have lain on or near the confines of Makkan-Meluhḫa. For the evidence see *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 43; Sir Aurel Stein, *An Archaeological Survey of Gedrosia*, p. 61 f. The problem of the location of Meluhḫa has been discussed at length, recently, with the evidence well summarized by W. F. Leemans, *Foreign Trade in the old Babylonian Period*, p. 159 f., who had independently suggested that the bird of Meluhḫa might have been the peacock. On p. 161 *loc. cit.*, Iran should I think have been added as a possible alternative; Leemans was not aware of the article by Gershevitch which proves that *mesu* is the sissoo tree. Lastly if, as is possible, *uknu* is lapis lazuli, and *gug gi-rin-e* is carnelian, both mentioned, e.g. in the Gudea texts as imports from Meluhḫa, it may well be inferred that this country extended as far as Afghanistan at the time; indeed Sogdiana supplied Darius I with both of these stones for his palace at Susa. For the inscription and the Old Persian text see R. G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar Text Lexicon*, p. 142 f.

¹⁹ Quoted from W. F. Leemans, *Journal of Economic and Social History* III, part 1, April 1960, whose attention had been drawn to this reference by Professor C. J. Gadd.

house once owned by a Tilmun merchant c. 1900 B.C.²⁰ My then chief and great master, Sir Leonard Woolley, had to wait twenty-five years for the full significance of the many cuneiform texts which we found in that house to be revealed by the brilliant work of A. L. Oppenheim. And rather more than thirty years later I had the pleasure of setting foot in Mohenjo-daro and seeing with my own eyes a Harappan city built of burnt-brick which to my mind was a striking technological reflection of the builders' methods used in these contemporary merchant houses at Ur.

Oppenheim's researches have given us a glimpse of the changing mechanism in this trade. At the beginning of the Agade and Third Dynasty of Ur periods it was under ecclesiastical and royal supervision. In the Larsa period it seems to have been privately financed by merchant trading-companies, and the ventures were so risky that the capitalists who laid out the bulk of the money for the journeys shared only in the profits and not in the losses. I do not think, as Oppenheim seems to imply, that we yet have enough evidence to show whether or not this change was the result of a progressive development in economics—I mean from state to private trading. Throughout the long period of Mesopotamian economy you find evidence for both, alternately or together, according to the contemporary political situation. The tablets which provide the bulk of our evidence for private trade in the direction of India come from Ur at a period when direct royal control was vested in the city of Larsa, and it would certainly be interesting to excavate the business houses in that place now represented by the great mound of Senkereh, and see whether or not trading conditions there were similar or different. I commend this project to my distinguished 'Irāqī colleagues who have done so much recently for the rehabilitation of the ruins at Ur. In Iran who knows what may not come to light by working on the littoral of the country where the limits of Magan and Meluhha are still but dimly defined. In India archaeologists have once again been adding quite recently to the evidence which has a bearing on this problem. I must mention especially the revealing work of Sri Rao and his colleagues at Lothal; elsewhere we have new evidence from the excavations by Dr. F. A. Khan at Kot Diji in Pakistan, and from Amri.²¹ Only recently two more Harappan coastal stations have been added to the map, namely: Sotka Kon, and Bala Kot; the former lies not far from Pasni, in the Makran coast; the latter, about fifty miles from Karachi—see Map (Fig. 1).²² In all these directions a concerted effort is bound to widen and deepen our knowledge of this fascinating trade.

As archaeologists we have to concentrate for the most part on the material evidence, but a pre-occupation with it should not distract us from recalling that such materials are only of real value in so far as they are the expression of the spirit, intellect and emotions of the men who made them. From time to time we must reflect on the human background of archaeology. What then of our traders, Akkadian, Iranian, Indian, or our middlemen, whoever they may have been? Did they behave in 2000 B.C. much as we do now, or were they different? Were they more advanced or were they more primitive? The answer again lies in our Babylonian and Assyrian tablets, and it is that they behaved in much the same way as merchants do the world over today; they had their laws, and much more important, their codes of honour, which their weaker brethren transgressed from time to time. When there were disputes the root cause was almost invariably a matter of quality which would involve doubtless an appeal, first to honour, then to arbitration, and only lastly to law. "Behave like a gentleman" (*lu awelati*) was a favourite expression between one disgruntled Assyrian merchant and another. In Sumer Ea-nasir, the famous Tilmun merchant of Ur, once got himself into serious trouble because of the poor quality of his copper ingots which he had gracelessly delivered with the quip "take it or leave it". "Who am I to be treated in this manner" his colleague replies: "that such a thing could happen between gentlemen!" But in fact such letters imply the recognition of a standard and of an accepted ethical code which can be the only stable basis for all long-term operations between one human being and another.

Let me conclude on a lighter vein with a letter written in about 1800 B.C. from one merchant prince

²⁰ *Antiquaries Journal* XI, p. 364, pl. XLVII.

²¹ Subject of an interesting paper by M. Jean-Marie Casal read to the Congress in Delhi, in 1961.

²² For mention of these two sites, see R. L. Raikes, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 66, No. 2, April 1964, article entitled "End

of the Ancient Cities of the Indus", p. 290; and G. F. Dales, *Antiquity* XXXVI, No. 142, June 1962, pp. 86-92, "Harappan Outposts on the Makran Coast". The unorthodox views espoused by Raikes have been criticized by Mortimer Wheeler in *Antiquity* XXXVIII, No. 152, December 1964, pp. 307-9.

to another. I quote an extract of what was written by a prince of Qatna in the Orontes valley of W. Syria to Ishme Dagan, the eldest son of the King of Assyria. This document was found in the Palace of Mari on the Euphrates; this is a free reading of it: "Here is a matter which I can hardly bear to mention, but to ease my heart, I must. You, a great King, asked me for the two horses of your desire, I had them sent to you. And believe it or not, you then sent me only 40 lb. of tin. Was there any bargaining, any reservation when you had from me the objects of your desire? And you have the effrontery to send me this small quantity of tin! Had you sent me nothing at all, it is true that on account of my father's god my heart would have been vexed. The price of these horses at our place in Qatna is 600 shekels of silver, and now you have sent me 40 lb. of tin. When anyone comes to hear of this whatever will he say? He will be unable to put us on the same footing. And yet your house is my house. What is lacking in your house that one brother cannot satisfy another brother's desire? Had you sent me no tin at all my heart would have had no reason whatever for being vexed. You are no great King! Why have you done this? Yet this house is your house!"²³ There ends the letter, and on that human note I think we may agree to infer that those concerned in the trade which linked the Indian Ocean with the Persian Gulf 4,000 years ago were neither better nor worse in their human relationships than we are today. But on a more hopeful note let me conclude by recalling what I hinted in the beginning: that in the free exchange of ideas which accompanies the exchange of things the only glimmer of hope for the future lies. A gathering such as this of scholars and craftsmen linked by a common love of their pursuit is as a small beacon of light ready to kindle a greater flame.

²³ *Archives royales de Mari V*, "Correspondance de Iasmah-Addu" by G. Dossin, letter 20.